



Jesus says to his disciples: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Do you know anyone who wears a cross? If you do, have you ever asked yourself why you have chosen that symbol, over others, to be part of what you wear. If you do not, have you ever asked yourself why you do not? Also consider whether you wear a crucifix – a cross with the figure of Jesus on it, versus a cross which has no figure of Jesus. This is a very personal choice and the answer can also vary over our lifetime.

For those who choose to wear a cross, it can be a life-giving and life-affirming reminder of a commitment to Jesus. It can be a symbol of what is more important in your life and your values. Hopefully, those values include love and care for neighbor. A clergy friend of mine keeps a collar in his car where he can see it. He says it can be a reminder to him of the standard of behavior to which God holds him and he holds himself, especially when road rage rears its ugly head.

This verse is a also prime example of when proof-texting can go astray. In the past, there have been instances when clergy (or others) have said to someone whose spouse is abusing them and has asked for direction about divorce: No, you have to stay in your marriage; the abuse is your cross to bear. Or someone suffering from cancer is told: Buck up, cancer is your cross to bear.

Frankly, that is abusive and certainly not loving your neighbor. The cross can be a symbol- something that points to a greater reality- even as it is a stark reminder that Jesus suffered, was crucified and died.

Brene Brown started her career as a researcher into shame when a supervisor told his staff that “you cannot shame or belittle people into changing their behavior.”¹ Yes, shaming someone may get them to change in the short term, but it never works in the long run. Think about behaviors you have wanted to change. When you have successfully changed a behavior, has it been self-talk that was positive and affirming: “You can do this”? Or has it been, for example, your self-talk of “I’m stupid” or “I can’t do that”? Shaming language is not effective long term.

Yes, Jesus was crucified- a death that we label shameful as well as horrific. And from what historians and scholars tell us, that was one of the goals or reasons behind that form of death within the Roman empire. People don’t want to be associated with something that is shameful.

But for Jesus and for us, that death, shameful as it was, is not the end of the story. And so whatever our cross might be, it does not have to be the end of our story. Whatever challenges we have to deal with in our life do not have to be the only thing that defines us.

Jesus may also have been saying that self-preservation is not the highest value. Love of God and love of neighbor are the highest value. Jesus tells us that where our treasure is there our heart is

¹ Brene Brown. *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't)* (New York: Gotham, 2007), 1.

Genesis 17: 1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22: 22-30; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8: 31-38

also. If your treasure is love of God and love of neighbor, then your heart reaches out to find situations where you can give back some of what you have been given. You are drawn to a life full of gratitude and act from an understanding of abundance.

Last week we considered the covenant God made with Noah and the promise never to destroy the earth through flood. God set the rainbow in the clouds as a reminder of this promise to love humankind despite an inclination towards chaos, hatred and sin.

Today we read about God's covenant with Abraham and Sarah. The sign God gives them of the covenant is a new name. Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah. Names are important symbols of who we are. Those of you who have children probably spent some time considering what to call your unborn child when he or she was born. It might be you chose a name meaningful to your family. It might be you chose a name meaningful to your life in the year your child was born. You may have looked in a book of names to see what the name meant.

Even those of us that do not have children but have pets have probably spent some time considering what to name our animal companion. Names are important because they symbolize our relationship with our children and our animal companions. They can symbolize our hopes and dreams.

In the covenant with Abraham, God promises blessings and posterity through children more numerous than the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the beach. Abraham and Sarah remained faithful to God even though they, too, had crosses to bear. They traveled from home and comfort to the new land God set aside for them. They waited until very old age to have a child- first Ishmael born of Hagar and then Isaac born of Sarah. Abraham and Sarah faced their cross and walked through the time of testing into a time of blessing and promise.

The gospel reading today might be seen as Jesus reminding us that there is more to the story. Some of you may remember Paul Harvey and his series "The rest of the story." Jesus is setting us up by telling us that he will suffer, he will die and that will not be the end of the story. Rather, we are called to hold the cross in front of us. Yes, pain and disappointment and trials are likely to be part of our life. But the cross is not the rest of the story. The cross is something we go through. We are not bound to it even as we pass through it. God's life is disclosed in the death of Jesus on the cross.

If you travel and visit various buildings, there is one symbol that will tell you the building is a church and that is the cross. No matter our denominational or other differences, a Christian church will have a cross somewhere. The presence of a cross marks this building as a Christian sanctuary. Although we are called to pick up our cross, we are not bound to the cross forever. The cross is a reminder that God walks besides even when we are most heavy laden. We are called to be disciples taking responsibility for going on our own journey of faith with a living God. Being a disciple involves giving up our own self-centered lives to love God and love neighbor. And we will see beyond the cross to the risen Christ. **Amen.**